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One step forward for mutual understanding among Japanese and Korean students upon the sea naming question between them.

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Every nation has own right to name places of the world, including seas, in their own language in the domestic uses. Other nations, not necessarily neighbors, may have their own opinions, and surely have rights to make some claims upon those naming. However, non-interventionism rules here. Thus, the Koreans have right to call the sea as “Donghae” (동해 : 東海) domestically, as much as the Japanese have the same right to call it as “Nihon-kai” (日本海) domestically.

The central question is the way the sea should be called officially in the context of international matters, and Korea is challenging status quo to call it “Sea of Japan”. Both Korea and Japan have right to appeal to international settings for exchange of opinions including United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, UNCISG. Ultimately, however, it is the international community who decides how it should be called. Neither Japanese, nor Korean government has right to make final decision. So are the Japanese or Korean people, either.

Here, I would like to make a modest proposal, not to solve the current central debate directly, but to enhance mutual understanding among younger generations of Japan and Korea. It is a very small step, but no matter small it is, it is better than nothing.

As far as I understand, current school atlases in Japan make no reference to the name “Tokai” (東海) on their maps of the Sea of Japan. Quite the same can be said with “Ilbonhae” (日本海) on maps of Korean school atlases. My proposal is to introduce those “other side views” into those atlases.

The very first step may be introduction of “Tonhae kai” (トソヘ海) in the map which focuses upon the Korean peninsula in Japanese atlases, and simultaneous introduction of “Nihonkaihae” (니혼카이해) to the Japanese archipelago in Korean maps. Younger generation students would learn about their neighboring land’s geography through these maps, and should understand neighbors call the sea name in different ways. Those names introduced first may not be “Tokai” or “Ilbonhae”, for those expressions are transliteration into their own languages.

Students should learn the fact that neighbors call the sea in a different way in a different language, first. Mutual understanding in a long run, starts from the point where we learn our difference properly.